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Stingers for Savimbi

A secret decision to send Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to Jonas Savimbi's anticomunist rebels in Angola is a breakthrough for the Reagan Doctrine.

It marks the first time in the long history of U.S. clandestine operations that a president has decided that top-of-the-line American weapons, not foreign-made castoffs, can be used to advance U.S. interests. The Stinger is at the very top. The shoulder-fired weapon can penetrate titanium-protected cockpits of Soviet MI-24 Hind helicopters, the gunships that control the battlefields of Angola as well as Nicaragua and Afghanistan.

The fact that previously skeptical Secretary of State George Shultz now is as enthusiastic about the Stinger as Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and CIA Director William Casey signals an end to prior restraints. That opens an important new chapter in the long struggle between the West and the Soviet Union where the ideological tide long has flowed for Moscow.

No other decision points up Reagan's heightened intent to bring to life his rhetoric that the West should be as committed to widening democracy as the Kremlin is committed to the spread of communism. Just how seriously this is taken is shown by the secret dispatch of the director of Central Intelligence to Pretoria to make sure the white South Africa government is not connected to covert U.S. help for Savimbi.

If the Stinger neutralizes the MI-24 "flying tanks" in Angola, it almost surely will be sent to anti-Sandinista guerrillas in Nicaragua once Congress finally approves Reagan's contra aid plan.

This represents a long path traveled by George Shultz, who started out skeptical about the whole idea of covert aid. When the secretary early in March journeyed up Pennsylvania Avenue for a crucial closed-door discussion of the aid program with Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole and several other Republican senators, he had previously agreed to the principle of anti-aircraft and antitank weapons for Savimbi.

Now, Shultz insisted that whatever covert aid was given, it must guarantee "sustainability" for Savimbi's rebellion. That is, it would do no good to give the rebels weapons that did not prevent their annihilation by some 30,000 Cubans and their Soviet advisers.

In a scheduled 45-minute session, which lasted twice that long, the senators persuaded him that only Stingers would do that. They correctly argued that the most valuable part of the MI-24 gunship is its Soviet-trained pilot, who would become vulnerable to the Stinger. Shultz agreed, and Reagan signed off on it.

But the president expressed special concern about what has always worried Shultz: the sub rosa alliance between South Africa and Savimbi. Reagan sought ways to insulate the U.S. aid program, particularly if sweetened with the potent Stinger, from any connection with the apartheid regime. He wanted South Africa, as one official told us, to be "hermetically sealed off" from any possible connection with the U.S. program.

That job, administration insiders told us, was accomplished by Casey himself. Although CIA officials never confirm or deny anything about their chief's travel schedule, it is known that Casey in mid-March spent several days in South Africa making Reagan's case.

Neither the Pretoria regime nor any South African nongovernment body

will have any connection with the new U.S. program. No U.S. covert aid will flow to Savimbi across the border of South Africa or Pretoria-controlled Namibia, which separates South Africa from Angola. That makes Zaire, a longtime friend of the United States, the necessary gateway for new weapons into Savimbi-controlled eastern Angola.

It is far too soon to know whether the famed Stinger will prove effective in the African bush against the flying tanks. But if it pays off, the decision to break a 40-year ban on the use of top-grade American weapons in covert competition with the Soviets could be of historic importance in pumping life into the Reagan Doctrine.

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